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ABSTRACT

The major organizational climate assessment techniques are described and the differing potential of these techniques in the designing of organizational development interventions is discussed. Based on the data, an approach to the development of a basic taxonomy for assessing organizational environments is mentioned. (Author/MLP)

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# TECHNIQUES FOR ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION STYLE

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## INTRODUCTION

Our interest here is in (1) the various techniques being used by OD practitioners to assess organizational environments and (2) the ways in which the products of these assessments are systematically utilized. Specifically, we are interested in the nature and extent of the impact of such assessments of organizational environments upon the characteristics of the designs of the interventions developed by the OD practitioner for use with the client system. The basis for our interest lies in certain crucial defining characteristics of OD, at least insofar as we understand and practice it. We shall very briefly recapitulate some of these defining characteristics, because they suggest certain assumptions which underlie our interest.

If we look for definitions, it soon becomes clear that OD developed an identity crisis at an early age to which it has clung to the present time. Definitions abound, and differ. As recently as

1973 a review of the definition problem listed five of the currently better-known definitions of OD and ended up proffering a new one (Marsh and Merkle, 1973). It appears that the state of the art is such that definitions of OD are only partial at best: it is more adequately understood in terms of (1) its historic lineage and (2) description of contemporary theory and practice.

An historical perspective. The tap root of OD is easily traceable to Lewinian field theory of social psychology. Lewin was intensely interested in the application of behavioral science to the solution of practical problems. Through his own work and through his involvement with an outstanding network of students and colleagues, Lewin did much to encourage the development of action research approaches to dealing with interpersonal, intergroup, and organizational problems. From the writing, research, and conceptual de-

velopment which emerged from this dynamic impetus (exemplified in the latter years of Lewin's career in the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT) two specific areas of technology arose which were to have particular significance for OD. One was the laboratory method of education and the second was the development of the methodology of survey research and feedback.

To many who are associated with OD, even in 1974, the point of view and technology associated laboratory education has dominated the field. The early days of OD - such as the work of McGregor and Jones at Union Carbide, Shepard and Buchanan at Esso in the late 1950's- were largely concerned with applying the behavioral science knowledge and concepts which underlie T - group technology to the problems of complex organizations. Much of the development of OD in the last fifteen years has been concerned with the adaptation of laboratory method concepts to the realistic needs of organization development. This has been marked by such trends as (1) the movement away from stranger T-groups frequently used in interpersonal development in favor of team development training activities, (2) concern for

impact upon the total organizational system and thus for intergroup linkages within the organization, and (3) increasing recognition of the function of power in organizational behavior (which has given rise to current interest in such technological developments as "power labs").

Survey research and feedback OD is a form of action research which has had somewhat less spectacular and less widespread applications to the development of OD. It has, nonetheless, provided a crucially important thrust paralleled only by the emergence of laboratory education itself, and probably is destined to play a more visible role in the future of OD (Bowers and Franklin, 1972).

The survey research and feedback approach to OD, comprises two vital phases: (1) gathering survey data concerning the perceptions and attitudes from people in the organization and (2) feedback of data to the participants in ways that will help them to assess their organizational problems and solve them. As is laboratory education, the survey research and feedback method is easily traceable to the Lewinian influence and particularly to the Research Center for Group Dynamics which was

founded at MIT at the close of World War II. At that time key contributors to the approach included Ronald Lippitt, Douglas McGregor, and John R.P. French. Following Lewin's death, a number of scientists moved to the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research and continued survey research-feedback studies. Rensis Likert and Floyd Mann are among those who have made recent substantial theoretical and practical contributions to the development of survey research and feedback as an OD approach.

Characteristics of organization development. Contemporary viewers of the ever-evolving OD scene will not, of course, unanimously agree on all specifics in discussing the characteristics and processes of OD. There is, however, fairly widespread agreement on some key points:

1. OD seeks to improve an organization's performance over the long haul through the application of behavioral science theory and technology.
2. Improving (a) the organization's problem-solving and decision making processes and (b) its self-renewal processes are of central importance.
3. It seeks, at least in the early stages of the process, to

achieve these ends by developing a social environment in the organization's work groups and its informal systems thought to be more effective in solving problems and facilitating change. Generally this is characterized as being more "open" and collaborative rather than defensive and competitive.

4. A trained change agent facilitates the process by designing and applying a planned intervention in close consultation with the organizational participants. An important element of the intervention process is its action research orientation.

The theory and technology of OD have developed to the point that the practitioner may choose from a rather impressive array of structured activities designed to help the client organizational system to become more effective. These OD activities may be at least roughly classified. One example is the following list of "families" of OD activities (French and Bell, 1973):



Diagnostic

Team-building

Intergroup

Survey-Feedback

Education and training

Technostructural

Process consultation

Grid OD

Third party peacemaking

Coaching and counseling

Life - and Career - planning

Planning and goal setting

Some of these activities - especially survey feedback and Grid OD - represent strategies for dealing with the total organization and may well stand as OD interventions in their own right. Other of these OD activities lack the comprehensive design and total organization focus to properly

qualify individually as OD interventions but must be combined with other activities into a total OD intervention design.

In concept, at least, OD interventions should be designed with the intent of achieving major organizational change and renewal. At the point and time of initial entry, the OD practitioner of course works on the client organization's immediate problems based upon an appropriate diagnosis. Since, as Burke has pointed out, "OD is a planned, sustained effort to change an organization's culture .... from a closed culture, characterized by decision-making vested in authority of position; inflexibility of organizational structure .... to a culture of openness; decision making as a function of authority of expertise, competence, and information; flexible organizational structures adaptive to changing needs and functions...." (Burke, 1972) it is to be expected that a vital facet of the diagnosis which the OD practitioner conducts in designing an intervention for the client system will produce insights into the learned and shared assumptions about the norms which regulate member behavior. Indeed, "data gathering about critical social processes in an organization is the

primary component of the diagnostic phase" (Burke, 1971).

In practice the OD practitioner gathers these data through (1) questionnaires, (2) observations of people at work, or (3) interviews. In the OD literature, this phase of the diagnosis is frequently referred to as studying "organizational climate" or (less frequently) "organizational culture". What do these terms mean? How useful are the data from these diagnostic procedures in shaping the design of OD interventions?

#### APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

In their perceptive review, "Environmental Variation in Studies of Organizational Behavior", Forehand and Gilmer noted that although organism-environment interaction models of organizational behavior were widely accepted there were "...few attempts to develop multivariate definition of environment, and fewer still to study behavior as a function of the simultaneous variation of personal and situational factors". (Forehand and Gilmer, 1964) Focusing on the measurement of organizational properties,

they indicated that there was no lack of attempts to "measure" these dimensions but that there was little convergence as to meaning with regard to the babble of adjectives assigned to those factors.

The term climate itself is a ubiquitous one and has been, and still is, utilized in a rather haphazard manner as a synonym for atmosphere, setting, culture, milieu, or environment. Since Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) experimented with the effect of "social climates" on the behavior of children there have been a host of attempts to grapple with the term climate, if not the concept. William Evan (1968) describes climate as "...a multi-dimensional perception of the essential attribute or character of an organizational system." Tagiuri (1968) defines climate as "the relatively enduring quality of the total environment that (a) is experienced by the occupants, (b) influences their behavior, and (c) can be described in terms of the value of a particular set of attributes of the environment". Halpin and Croft (1964) indicated

that climate was the environmental counterpart to individual personality as did George Stern (1962) and his associates who equated climate with Murray's conceptualization of environmental press.

Other writers reviewed climate in terms more likely to account for idiosyncratic characteristic of organizational members. Argyris (1958) for example, saw climate in terms of the homeostatic state of the formal organizational structures, individual personality traits and job satisfaction while Lonsdale (1964) referred to climate "as the global assessment of the interaction between the task-achievement dimension and needs-satisfaction dimension within the organization."

In a more recent attempt to at least map the domain Forehand (1968) saw climate involving at least three sets of variables: (1) environmental variables; size, structure (2) personal variables; motivations, attitudes, desires, needs and (3) outcome variables, as satisfaction, job motivation, and productivity.

### Techniques For Assessing Organizational Climate

If definitions of climate seem to abound, attempts to "objectively" describe the organizational climates of individual organizations are limitless by comparison, Owens (1969) has pointed out that the literature concerning organizational climate in business organizations is replete with various frameworks which take the form of observation guides, case analysis techniques, and paper-and-pencil inventories. This is true of OD in education as well.

A great deal of scientific work reported in the literature since 1964 has added to the ways in which organizational environments may be understood and assessed. Emerging from this research are a number of systematic efforts which represent various approaches to the study of organizational behavior. Some of these have been subjected to a certain amount of testing as to their reliability and validity; on their face, the instruments developed in connection with these researches seem to hold some promise as tools for the OD practitioner. Those listed in Figure 1 are illustrative of the spectrum of approaches to the diagnosis of organizational climates extant in the literature. Some of these focus

(Steinhoff, 1965)

upon the total person-environment ecology, others upon specific work

processes, and others upon leader-group dynamics.

FIGURE 1. Illustrative instruments designed to assess organizational environments

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title of Assessment</u>	<u>Comment</u>
Blake and Mouton	Organization Grid	Designed to describe the author's conceptualization of three key dynamics influencing organizational behavior. Draws eclectically from organizational theory.
Halpin and Croft	Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire	Views climate as analog to individual personality. In the tradition of Ohio State. Leadership studies (e.g., LBDQ).
Likert and Likert	Profile of the School	Adapted from "Profile of Organizational and Performance Characteristics". Classification of "management systems" based upon dimensions of power equalization.
Litwin and Stringer	Organizational climate measure	Construct drawn from McClelland-Atkinson model of motivation. Environmental dimensions define task environment of organization.
Miles	Do's and Don'ts	Focuses on openness, trust, collaboration and self-analysis of task groups
Stern and Steinhoff	Organizational Climate Index	Adopted from Stern studies of college cultures. Theoretical rationale drawn from Murray's needs-pressure construct and used with a parallel personality instrument
Taylor	Survey of Organizations	Intended for use to gather, analyze and feed back information about an organization's health. Dimensions include organizational climate, managerial leadership, peer behavior, group process, and satisfaction.

In attempting to determine the extent to which organizational climate assessment techniques are utilized in the designing of OD interventions for educational organization, a two-stage procedure was undertaken.

First, the existing literature on the topic "climate" or "organizational environment" was reviewed to determine the existence of formal approaches to the definition and measurement of educational environments.

The second stage involved a survey of individuals who are engaged in OD practice in schools to find out (1) what techniques they use to gather diagnostic data from schools and school systems and (2) how they use these data in designing OD interventions.

We have previously identified 224 individuals in the United States who described themselves as having engaged in OD work with public schools as either internal or external consultants. We asked them to report (1) the techniques they used for gathering climate data from schools and school systems and (2) the ways in which they used such diagnostic data in shaping the design of OD interventions. 83 usable responses were received.



## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When asked what techniques they used for assessing organizational climate in client schools and school systems only seven of the responding organization development practitioners indicated that they employed one or more of the recognized assessment techniques for which there are published data concerning factor structure, reliability, and validity (e.g., O.C.I., O.C.D.Q, Profile of a School). Five respondents indicated that they designed their own instruments to meet the specific needs of individual situations. Eight practitioners used a combination of (1) a specially-designed paper-and-pencil instrument plus (2) group or individual interviews. The remaining sixty-three respondents indicated a preference for conducting individual or group interviews with key people at various levels in the client system to sense the tenor of the organizational environment.

Analysis of responses to open ended questions in the inquiry makes it clear that the prevalent view of these consultants was that organizational climate is best understood in terms of "emotional tone" or "level of trust" in the client organization. Only one responding

OD consultant used such terms as "organizational structure", "communication", and "decision making" as aspects of organizational climate.

In addition, only one other respondent indicated an interest in "power relationships" in dealing with climate.

Regardless of the assessment technique used - whether structured questionnaires, informal opinionnaires, or interviews - the uses of resultant data falls into three categories:

1. contract planning and goal setting,
2. shaping the entry OD activity,
3. feedback to participants in an action research mode.

In addition to these uses, those few who employed structured instruments reported that they used climate data to analyze client organizational dynamics comparatively in terms of the dimensions or concepts on which their instruments are based (i.e., leadership style, achievement orientation, etc.).

By far the most frequent use of climate data - however obtained -

is to present it to organizational participants (with the OD practitioner acting as facilitator) for their analysis. There is some suggestion from the responses to our inquiry that the questions asked by OD practitioners in their idiosyncratic climate opinionnaires and interviews may have a highly teleological relationship to the intervention design. For example, it is well-established that interpersonal and intergroup trust, communication, and defensiveness are universal concerns in organizations. By defining climate strictly in terms of variables such as these, the selection of the intervention design would appear to be virtually a foregone conclusion.

One of the characteristics of global definitions of organizational climate which we have described as appearing in the literature on the social-psychology of organizations is that they deal with both the individual person and the organizational environment. It is interesting to note that of the responding OD consultants whom we contacted, no one indicated that he utilized a measure of characteristics of in-

dividual participants in his approach to analyzing the dynamics of the social ecology of the organizational system.

Our review of the literature and our inquiry to OD consultants around the country indicates that highly eclectic approaches tend to be popular in diagnosing organizational climate. This may be due to the lack of fundamental clarity as to (1) just what is meant by the term "organizational climate" (which is widely considered to be an important first target, at least, of OD interventions), and (2) what crucial factors in fact define organizational climate (which in themselves suggest goals and OD technology which may be appropriate in designing interventions). We are conscious, of course, that OD is concerned with applying scientific concepts and knowledge to efforts to improve the functioning of organizations. In that context, we feel that there is a need to synthesize the various systematic approaches which already exist in the literature with a view to identifying the variables (or clusters of variables) which may be interrelated. This, we feel, would encourage more precise mapping of the complex topography

of a domain which is of central concern to anyone interested in OD.

Attempts have been made to classify organizational problems and OD interventions. One approach which has been widely used was proposed by Schmuck and Miles (1971, p. 8), which presents a three-dimensional model of OD technology. This is useful to describe the range of options available to the OD practitioner as he approaches the task of designing an intervention.

We think that it is helpful to provide OD practitioners with even more analytical concepts and tools which enable them to increase the precision of their diagnoses and to tailor their intervention styles so that they address the crucial variables more specifically. For example, Schmuck and Miles include the following in their list of "Diagnosed Problems": Culture, climate, leadership, authority, problem-solving, decision-making, conflict/cooperation, and role definition. At one time or another each of these "problems" has been described as being a constituent element of an organization climate schema (i.e., "climate for decision making", "climate for problem solving",

etc.). Others of the "problems" have been identified by students of organizational climate as being subsumed under that rubric. Leader behavior is, for example, a prime element in Halpin and Croft's OCDQ. Aspects of the organization's authority system, for another example, are measured by the CCI. Likert's concern for power equalization includes such matters as conflict/cooperation and decision making in the organization.

Critics of OD have often commented on what they perceive to be a certain imprecision in OD terminology as to (1) the problems being addressed and (2) the particular relevance of OD technology in dealing with specific recognizable elements of those problems. Indeed, such concerns are not the sole province of critics. W. Warner Burke (1972), for example, defines OD as "... a planned, sustained effort to change an organization's culture" and observes that "OD practitioners are involved with bits and pieces of OD technology, such as team-building sessions and intergroup problem-solving meetings, but there is little evidence that demonstrates that systematic, planned

organizational change is taking place ... More often than not, OD practitioners are asked to conduct team-building interventions because the 'guys are simply not working together effectively. We can't seem to get it together'... it may be, heaven forbid, that in some cases no team or teamwork is needed at all."

Our observation of OD practitioners who deal with schools tends to confirm this view.

The beginnings of OD are generally dated from circa 1958, and the first widely-accepted books on the subject appeared in 1969 (the Addison-Wesley six-pack). Since then, of course, the technology of OD has experienced rapid development and OD practice has gained extraordinarily in popularity.

Research in the general area of organizational climate has paralleled the development of OD. Halpin and Croft's OCDQ, Stern and Steinhoff's OCI, Likert's Profile of the School - indeed, virtually all empirical studies of organizational climate have appeared in the literature during the 1964-1974 decade.

It seems clear that the time has come for Organization Development to tap the knowledge and concepts which presently exist more fully and indeed, to contribute to continued development of systematic understanding of an area so basic to OD itself. Steps for improving the science of OD might include the following:

1. Development and refinement of diagnostic systems based upon clearly stated theoretical and conceptual models.
2. Move toward clarification of terminology used to describe the factors of organizational climate (e.g., personal and environmental dimensions).
3. Empirical studies aimed at better understanding the possible articulation between (a) significant elements of the diagnosed organizational climate and (b) the design of interventions.
4. Inclusion of more cognitive input as to the existing state of knowledge about organizational climate and its possible uses in OD practice in present curricula for training OD specialists.



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